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An Exploration into the Experiences of Blogging by those with Mental Health Conditions

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An Exploration into the Experiences of Blogging by those with Mental Health Conditions

ABSTRACT

Bloggging as a current platform for those experiencing mental health has gained popularity over the past few years as it is a space in which individuals are confidently able to express their thoughts and feelings (Boniel-Nissim and Barak, 2013). The current study explored the experiences of those with mental health conditions that use bloggging as an expressive platform. Five individual's blogggs were downloaded and used as the source of data analysis in order to understand: A) If there were any positive aspects of bloggging regarding mental health. B) Whether any negative experiences were apparent for those who blogg, and C) Exploring whether these experiences play a role in promoting self-reported psychological wellbeing. Personal webloggs were utilised as the source of data ensuring a current analysis. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed four themes: Belonging, self-expression, humiliation, and loneliness. Revealing both positive and negative aspects of bloggging as reported by the participants themselves.

KEY WORDS:	BLOGGING	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	MENTAL HEALTH	PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING	BLOGGERS EXPERIENCES
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Introduction

Blogging

The use of Blogging (Weblogs), is a new and current platform for personal communication, that has become increasingly popular with internet users (Trammell and Keshelashvill, 2005). The term blogging refers to an individual's online journal, in which bloggers (the person who owns the blog) posts their own personal thoughts, interests, and experiences in message and photo format, in order to express themselves publically, for others to openly read about and comment on (Jung, Song and Borderer, 2012). Hookway (2008), describes blogs as a composure of personal and sometimes, intimate content on a public "self-narrative". Various types of blogs are available, but according to Herring, Scheldt, Bonus, and Wright (2004), 70% of all blogs are personal. These blogs are implements that are used to express personal; and in some cases, private content, as they would in a diary format; to share with members of the public, family and friends (Herring *et al*, 2005; Lenhart and Fox, 2006). Blogging allows individuals to anonymously share their experiences with a sense of 'invisibility', which can often promote confidence, thus creating a platform in which individuals are confidently able to express thoughts and feelings (Boniel-Nissim and Barak, 2013).

Despite Blogging being a relatively new form of online communication, there is a significant amount of literature analysing the rationale of internet use; which may be helpful in understanding the reasons why individuals blog (Guadagno, Okdie and Eno, 2008). Findings suggested four main domains that blogging offers as a social interaction platform: a decrease in the significance of physical appearance, anonymity, control over the pace of social interactions, and the attenuation of physical distance (McKenna and Bargh, 2000). Blogging allows individuals to express as much, or a little of themselves as they choose, allowing for a choice in the level of anonymity they feel desirable. Research shows that when an individual perceives himself or herself as being anonymous, this changes the way they interact and portray themselves to others, as they gain a sense of depersonalization on deindividuation (Postmes, Spears and Lea, 2002). Suggesting, individuals that blog may divulge information throughout their posts, that is more revealing than they intend and perceive it to be (Guadagno. Et al,

2008). Furthermore, evidence suggests individuals that blog, have a reduced sense of self-awareness, leading individuals to be less conscious of, and aware of who they are communicating with (Johnson 2001).

Positive Aspects of Blogging

Past analysis has found that the therapeutic value of blogging for individuals experiencing mental health conditions seems promising (Miura and Yamashita, 2004). Recently the internet has become a prime space for users to openly share their experiences of mental health and connect with others in similar circumstances (Eysenbach and Kohler, 2003; Madalyn *et al*, 2012). Lenhart and Fox (2006), found that blogging creates a comfortable space for self-expression. In which people are able to be open and honest about their own personal experiences, without any fear of judgement, as a result of the anonymity provided by the internet (Smith, 2010). Nardi *et al* (2004), suggests that blogging is an approach one uses, in order to share personal life experiences with others and express deeply felt emotions. Expressive writing via online platforms, offers individuals the opportunity to emotionally express themselves, and those that convey their experiences of mental health through online blog forums show a decrease in anxiety and depressive related symptoms (Niles *et al*, 2015).

Miura and Yamashita (2004), argue that the safe space for self-exposure that blogging provides, and the skills that one can learn through blogging can lead to a sense of empowerment, which contributes to an improvement in psychological wellbeing. The social anonymity that comes from blogging and freedom to “be one’s self” online allows bloggers to express themselves in a way that is positive. The freedom of expression that comes from posting personal blogs online regarding one’s mental health leads individuals to feel a sense of liberation that furthermore, can lead to an increase in their wellbeing overall (Gurak and Antonijevic, 2008). Research suggests that blogging is a positive form of self-expression and those who express themselves publically online experience positive feelings including higher self-esteem and increased confidence (John and Srivastava, 1999).

Research has suggested that blogging presents individuals with a supportive social network, and these close personal online relationships can reduce stress

and have a positive impact on individuals' psychological wellbeing. (Jung, Song and Vorderer, 2012). Bloggers often feel that they belong to a social group when they post blogs online and receive support, and in regards to discussing their mental health, bloggers report that they feel close and a sense of familiarity to those that they communicate with via their blog forum (Papaharissi, 2002).

Negative Experiences of Blogging

Contrary to this, alternative literature has suggested that internet use, and blogging can lead to negative consequences, such as reduced self-esteem and depressed mood (Sagioglou and Greitemeyer, 2014). Literature suggests, these negative consequences may occur as a result of others posting hurtful opinions or judgments onto ones' blog through the public comment section. Furthermore, findings suggest that individuals often post information on their blogs without considering possible negative consequences, and this can often leave bloggers vulnerable to cyber-bullying which can be detrimental to their psychological wellbeing (Lewis, 2006).

Previous research has identified potentially negative risks associated with blogging, for example; cyber bullying (Juvonen and Gross, 2008), consequently leading to a decrease in one's psychological wellbeing. Research suggests that personal blogs are a prime tool in which harassment and cyberbullying is able to take place, and this is being recognised nationally as a grave issue for bloggers (Kift, 2009). Even more worrying is that all too often this threat is coming not just from online strangers, but potentially from people closer to home as a result of the anonymity that the internet provides (Butler, 2010). A large amount of research that has considered the negative aspects of blogging, suggests individuals that write about negative experiences within their blogs, such as anger, sadness and loneliness; may in fact use blogs as a platform in which to "reflect on these feelings and express them in constructive, positive ways". (Anderson-Butcher *et al*, 2010).

For those who are interested in blogging as an emotional expressive platform, research has found that these individuals often exhibit dissatisfaction with life, both on, and offline, and any difficulties they already experience, may be enhanced when they decide to share these experiences publically, as reading

negative feedback can lead to feelings of shame (Nardi *et al*, 2004). Furthermore, Guadagno, Okdie & Eno (2008), found that anxious individuals may blog in an attempt to assuage feelings of loneliness and isolation with the hope of reaching out to others and forming new social connections, hence if this does not happen there is a possibility of the anxiety increasing. A decrease in social interaction throughout ones' blog may result in feelings of loneliness, which in turn can have detrimental effects on overall psychological wellbeing thus creating additional complications regarding one's mental health. (Burke, Marlow and Lento, 2010). Some of the earliest published literature surrounding internet use and blogs as a communication platform found that extensive use of blogs, could lead to increased feelings of loneliness and result in social isolation (Kraut *et al*, 1998).

Aims of research

The majority of research considers the beneficial utilization of blogs for mental health, however, relatively few studies have examined both positive and negative experiences of blogging and the role this plays in promoting ones psychological wellbeing. Stanton *et al* (2000), argues that the wide majority of individuals that use blogs, use them on their own premise, and make the choice themselves to share personal experiences with others as an emotional coping mechanism. Taking this into consideration, research shows that individuals experiencing social difficulties, and those that have trouble communicating to others about their mental health, reveal a high motivation for internet use weblogs (Amachai-Hamburger, Wainapel & Fox, 2002; Amachai-Hamburger, 2007), and therefore find them a positive Platform (Hookway, 2008).

Although, contrasting literature has noted blogging can create negative experiences for an individual, and although literature looking at the negative aspects of blogging is fairly sparse, it has been argued that blogging can even go as far as to impair ones' psychological wellbeing. Thus, creating further negative consequences regarding ones' mental health, including feelings of loneliness, depression and low self-esteem. (Sagioglou and Greitemeyer, 2014). Therefore, the current study aims to build upon previous literature, looking at the positive aspects of blogging, but also ensuring that any negative aspects are clearly identified, by taking an unbiased approach to analysis. And exploring

whether these experiences play a role in promoting self-reported Psychological Wellbeing.

Methodology

Qualitative research approach – methodological framework

A qualitative approach to psychological research was carried out, as the focus of the study was on individuals experiences of blogging regarding mental health, which only applied to a small, specific group of people. Qualitative methods of analysis give voice to those within marginalised groups who share a similar understanding of lived experiences (Ponterotto, 2005). Thus, a qualitative approach was decided as the most suitable for this research, as participants within the study often feel a sense of isolation due to their mental health condition. According to Peters (2010), qualitative methods offer an effective and beneficial analytical approach, providing strong analysis, whilst also being understanding and meaningful. Moreover, Maxwell (2012) proposes that qualitative research is a flexible and naturally open form of analysis, which leads to the pursuit of new discoveries and findings. Polkinghorne (2005) states qualitative research is beneficial in describing and clarifying “human experience as it appears in people’s lives” (p. 137), thus providing data analysis that is strong and reflective. The nature of the study involved sensitive topics, such as mental health conditions; and personal topics, such as the promotion of psychological wellbeing. Hence, there was a possibility that participants would be at a high risk of distress. A qualitative approach was chosen, therefore, as the most appropriate method of analysis as it focuses on experience and feelings in a sensitive way, whilst also allowing the researcher to gain in-depth accounts of participant’s views. Furthermore, Wilmot (2005), suggests that qualitative methods of analysis provides researchers with the ability to understand the world, from the perspective of the people being studied. Which allowed for a deeper understanding of participant’s experiences, and analysis which focused on participant’s perspective on the matter.

Recruitment of participants

In total, twelve participants were contacted for the purpose of the study, and recruited via volunteer sampling so they were able to consent to their blog being analysed, allowing for a convenient and ethically sound sampling method. Due to seven individuals declining participation, a total number of five participants' blogs were utilised as the source of data. Although this number is small, Hammersley (2015), suggests that in qualitative research, sample size is to be determined by the richness of the data, rather than a specific number. All participants were regular bloggers that shared their experiences of living with a mental health condition through an online blog forum.

Data Collection method

In order to search for blog posts relevant to the study, search terms such as 'Mental Health', 'Experiences of Blogging', and 'Psychological Wellbeing' were used, in order to identify blogs that specifically discussed blogging regarding mental health, and the experiences, both positive and negative that this creates. All blogs utilised for the study were active and recent, posted within the last 5 years, as a result of searching for recently published material, which therefore allowed for a current analysis. Consequently, posts were taken through sampling across all blogs from each participant, until data saturation was reached. The blog posts were then downloaded and saved onto an encrypted device, and used for data analysis.

Data Analysis

In order to analyse blog posts a thematic analysis was utilised for the purpose of this study. This form of analysis was used as, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a research tool that is able to construct a robust, accurate analysis, whilst also being flexible, allowing the researcher to generate interpretative constructs relating to the data (Harden and Thomas, 2008). Furthermore, as the downloaded data came from personal blogs, thematic analysis allowed for an in depth, complex account of the data, whereby the outcome presented accurate representations of individual's experiences, that spans over each individual participant (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Boyatzis (2009), characterizes thematic analysis as a tool to use across different

methods, as oppose to a specific method. And states that it is an analysis tool that all researchers should learn, as it provides useful core skills that prove helpful when conducting alternative forms of qualitative analysis. It is crucial for a researcher to understand the concept of thematic analysis which is defined as a 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79). If thematic analysis is not carried out correctly and clarity on the process and practice of this method is not fully understood this can impede related research that may be carried out in the future (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Due to the aims of the current research this resulted that only a small, specific number of participants being selected, in this instance, individuals who blog, specifically regarding experiences of their own mental health conditions. Therefore, an inductive approach to thematic analysis was found to be the most beneficial. Braun and Clarke (2006), argue that an inductive approach allows for themes that are strongly linked to that data, however they are not driven by any theoretical interest from the researcher within the given area or topic. Therefore, inductive analysis is a process of coding data without trying to fit it into any preexisting analytical assumptions that the researcher may have beforehand regarding the data. It was paramount that the researcher stayed objective to ensure that no previous assumptions affected that quality of data analysis, ensuring an unbiased interpretation of the data and an analysis which is data-driven (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Regarding the theme level that was identified within the analysis, it was decided that the latent level approach would prove to be the most beneficial and therefore was used. Braun and Clarke (2006), describe the latent level as one in which underlying ideas, beliefs, assumptions and perceptions, are all identified and examined, going beyond the semantic context of the data. This approach goes further than describing the surface meaning of data, and looks to identify features that give it specific form and meaning. For the purpose of the current research topic this approach integrated well as it aimed to delve deeper into participants' thoughts and experiences and the ways in which they portrayed these throughout their blogs.

Throughout the analysis of the data, the six phases of thematic analysis, as identified by Braun and Clarke (2006), were used, (See Fig. 1), in order to allow for a rich, empirical, account of the data, and providing accurate interpretations of participant's experiences. Once data was collected, all blogs posts were downloaded to provide a representation of the data that allowed the first phase of analysis to be carried out, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data, by ensuring all data was read and re-read and writing down any initial interpretations. Following this, the researcher then generated any initial codes that were of interest, in which significant details were identified and collated together with other data that was relevant to each code. Following identification of codes, they were then merged into potential themes that corresponded into a specific category. A thematic 'map' of analysis was generated in order to review these themes and ensure they were relevant and worked in relation to the coded data extracts. Subsequently following review of the themes, they were identified and labelled as: belonging (1), self-expression (2), shame (3), and loneliness (4).

**PHASES OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS
(ADAPTED FROM BRAUN & CLARKE, 2006)**

	PHASES	DESCRIPTION OF ANALYSIS PROCESS
1	Familiarising myself with data	i) Narrative preparation, i.e. transcribing data ii) (Re-)reading the data and noting down initial ideas
2	Generating initial codes	i) Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across entire data set ii) Collating data relevant to each code
3	Searching for themes	i) Collating codes into potential themes ii) Gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4	Reviewing themes	i) Checking if themes work in relation to the coded extracts ii) Checking if themes work in relation to the entire data set iii) Reviewing data to search for additional themes iv) Generating a thematic "map" of the analysis
5	Defining and naming themes	i) On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells ii) Generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6	Producing the report	i) Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples ii) Final analysis of selected extracts iii) Relating the analysis back to the research question, objectives and previous literature reviewed

(Fig.1. The six phases of Thematic Analysis used, as identified by Braun and Clarke, (2006).

Ethical considerations (refer to appendices)

The BPS (2009), states that it is of the utmost importance to consider and implement ethical behaviour when conducting a study involving participants. A number of ethical observations relevant to conducting qualitative research in an online format were considered by the researcher. These ethical challenges are

unique as a result of traceability of quotes (Beaulieu and Estalella, 2012), and furthermore, sensitive data content relating to the participant, can potentially negatively impact the individuals taking part. Therefore, ethical practice was implemented and conducted in line with the BPS Codes of practice; which states that ethical considerations are 'a statement of values, reflecting the fundamental beliefs that guide ethical reasoning, decision making, and behaviour' (BPS, 2009: 9). The participants within this study were recruited via volunteer sampling, in which, once their blog posts were identified as being suitable for the nature of the study, they were contacted via email, and sent an Invitation Email (*Appendix 1*), a Participant Information Sheet (*Appendix 2*), and a Consent Form (*Appendix 3*). In which the basic details of the study, the advantages and disadvantages of taking part, and the matter of confidentiality were outlined. They were also made aware of the possibility of their blogs being easily traceable as a result of the quotes used from them within the study. This gave participants the opportunity to accept or decline participation, and ensured they were fully aware of any ethical issues relating to the study beforehand.

The BPS (2009), states psychologists carrying out studies should always respect the "knowledge, insight and experience" (10) of any participants. Although participants were not asked direct questions, and instead their blog posts were downloaded for analysis; as a result of the sensitive nature of the study, there was a possibility that they may have found aspects upsetting or distressing. In order to address this issue, all participants were given the option to request access to the report upon completion, so they were able to check the accuracy and bring up any issues they had with the researcher. In the instance that any of the participants became distressed or upset as a result of the sensitive information involved within the study, they knew of their right to withdraw up to three weeks after giving their consent, and subsequently would have been directed to the relevant support. Following their participation, all participants were debriefed (*Appendix 4*), in order to identify any unforeseen harm done to their mental health, therefore allowing for assistance to be arranged (BPS, 2009: 20).

Elgesem (2002), argues that bloggers write with an expectation of privacy, therefore throughout the study, ethical guidelines were adhered to in order to implement this presupposition of privacy. Anonymity and confidentiality was of

the utmost importance throughout the study, and although there was no guarantee that it could be assured, as quotes from the blogs may mean participants are traceable to others, all participants were made aware of this beforehand. Furthermore, participants were given pseudonyms for the purpose of the study, therefore assisting their anonymity.

To ensure ethical guidelines had been met, an Application for Ethical Approval Form (*Appendix 5*), was completed by the researcher, in which all ethical issues relevant to the study were outlined, and full ethical clearance was approved prior to any data being collected.

Analysis & Discussion

After careful analysis of blog posts, and from the data that was collected, four main themes had been identified. These themes were labelled as: belonging (1), self-expression (2), humiliation (3), and loneliness (4). Literature often reflects the power expressive writing within a virtual social environment has on an individual's psychological wellbeing and this is frequently inhabited by many bloggers. Kraut *et al* (2002), found that the interpersonal interactions that are often anonymised with internet use, can alleviate negative emotions, contributing to an overall improvement in ones' psychological wellbeing, that expands to their life off-line. However, just as positive experiences that come from blogging about mental health can improve one's life overall, any negative experiences can also have a detrimental effect on life away from a virtual environment. Consequently, the public sharing and presentation of experiences that comes with blogging allows for a subjective sense of privacy (Hoyt and Pasupathi, 2008).

Theme 1: Belonging

A concept identified throughout analysis of the data was a sense of belonging that bloggers often feel as a result of sharing their experiences of mental health online. Belonging is best described as an experience in which an individual feels important or valued to an external referent, and encountering a fit between oneself, and that referent (Hagerty *et al*, 1992). According to Baker and Moore (2008), those who blog show significant improvement in their psychological wellbeing as their feelings of belongingness and social connections improve.

When individuals share frank and open experiences online of their mental health conditions, and receive an outpouring of support from those that read their blogs, this gives them a sense that they are not alone and they often feel empowered by virtue of this. This notion is demonstrated in the posts taken from the following participants:

...When I posted my first blog about my anxiety disorder I was overwhelmed with the amazing response I had. Honestly you all make me feel like I'm not fighting this on my own and I know I'm not alone.

(Amy)

...Posting blogs that have personal experiences on there for me is a difficult thing for me to do but receiving support, like usually from people I don't even know, well it gives me a real sense of belonging in this world so thank-you.

(Cara)

...For me, mental health is an unsettling subject and one which I've kept to myself for so long, but through posting such honest and personal stories on my blogs about my depression I've realised it's not so bad after all. I receive so many messages from people that have read my blogs and are going through similar experiences to me, knowing that I'm not fighting this alone makes it so much easier to deal with.

(Beth)

Previous studies have demonstrated an association between belongingness status and an increase in ones' psychological wellbeing (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). This sense of belonging that blogs create for an individual seem to be as a result of the perceived social support bloggers receive on their personal blogs. Research correlates with this concept stating that the support an individuals blog gains from a social perspective influences feelings of belonging (Jung, Song and Vorderer, 2012).

For some participants, blogging is the only place they feel a sense of belonging, as a result of mental health still being a taboo subject in life offline (Singh, 2017). When an individual publically blogs about their mental health, they are

often constructing an identity, whereby they will choose certain aspects of their life to share (Mead, 2000). This could be one reason as to why the sense of belonging is all too often only experienced in an online format, as only particular aspects of a bloggers life are shared. Within the following posts this concept is exhibited:

...As I've gotten older, it's become more apparent to me that discussing my mental health is very much a taboo topic and hardly anyone ever wants to discuss it with me. Having my blogs give me a platform in which I am openly able to say whatever I want and I know that I'll always receive a good response from some people. It's scary to know the stigma that's attached to mental health within our daily lives. I feel like I belong and I'm someone when I'm online and I just wish I felt that away from my blogs too.

(Ellie)

...To all of you that read my blogs and for all the support you've given me I just want to say thank-you! I just hope that someday that sense of belonging I feel when I post my blogs will extend to my life away from the laptop.

(Amy)

It is apparent that this sense of belonging that bloggers feel when discussing their mental health through online blog forums is occasionally only experienced online. This sense of belonging can lead individuals to have positive views of sharing their mental health experiences, which in turn can improve their overall psychological wellbeing. However, if this sense of belonging is only experienced in an online format, this could potentially lead to a decrease in their psychological wellbeing as a result of these positive attributes not being available to them in their day to day lives offline. Literature supports this notion, and states that positive aspects of blogging do not necessarily lead to an increase of positive psychological wellbeing 'in real life' (Jung, Song and Vorderer, 2012).

Theme 2: Self-expression

The second theme that was identified following analysis of the blog posts was the notion of self-expression in which individuals feel when blogging about their

mental health condition. Blogging creates a comfortable space for self-expression, in which bloggers are able to be honest about personal experiences of mental health, without fear of judgement (Lenhart and Fox, 2006). The following quotes indicate that the participants within this study use blogging as a tool in which to self-express:

...I love that I'm able to be so open with you about my stories of mental health. I feel that I can be myself and show my personality to you all through my blog.

(Ellie)

...My blog allows me to show you who I am, I can express all my deepest thoughts, feelings and opinions on my blog which I sometimes struggle to do face to face.

(Daniel)

...In day to day life ill always get asked "how are you?" and ill usually reply with a stoic expression like "I'm fine" but I know deep down that I'm just saying this to hide how I really feel. When I come online and blog about my day to day life, or my stories about mental health I realise that this is the place where I'm able to truly be myself and express who I am. On my blog there's no "I'm fine" because if I'm not, you'll all know about it.

(Amy)

Boniell-Nissim and Barak (2013), suggest that the anonymity and invisibility blogging offers, promotes the confidence of bloggers which allows them to express their thoughts and feelings. Studies have demonstrated the link between expressive writing regarding personal, emotional experiences and a significant improvement in mental health; moreover, expressive writing has found to have strong therapeutic benefits. (Pennebaker, 1997). Thus, when bloggers post stories online concerning their mental health, they feel able to openly express themselves, leading to a positive increase in their psychological wellbeing. A key element in motivation for using personal blogs is the ability to openly express opinions and personal stories, literature suggests that blogs serve as a kind of diary in which bloggers feel safe enough to use them in order to write about intimate experiences (Trajtemberg and Yiakoumetti, 2011). For

many individuals experiencing mental health, feeling comfortable enough to express themselves can sometimes be a difficult task (Kirsh *et al*, 2016). Hence, when bloggers are able to self-express online, this has a profound impact on their psychological wellbeing overall.

Theme 3: Humiliation

When blogging is used as an emotional expressive platform, research has found that it can lead bloggers to feel humiliated and embarrassed, if they receive negative feedback on a blog post, or if the content of a blog post is not acknowledged by others (Nardi *et al*, 2004). Blogs are used for presentation of self, and bloggers use them in the hope that they will “be accepted as appropriate and plausible performances” (Hine, 2001:122). Thus, when individuals post revealing information on their blog they often do so in the hope that it will gain acceptance from others, and when this does not happen it can lead bloggers to experience feelings of embarrassment (Lankshear and Knobel, 2008). Within the following quotes the participants share these feelings of embarrassment that often arises as a result of sharing their experiences of mental health throughout their blogs:

...When I first started blogging I thought it would be a tool in which I was able to share my experiences of mental health in a safe, understanding environment. However, I slowly began to realise that it's not always that easy and sharing my experiences often left me feeling more embarrassed about my condition.

(Ellie)

...I think it's normal for bloggers to sometimes feel embarrassed, we're basically letting strangers into our lives and aspects of life can sometimes be embarrassing. I just see it as normal now and accept it as a part of my blogging life.

(Beth)

The stigma attached to mental health can create feelings of embarrassment (Scambler, 2009), and this notion is demonstrated in participants' posts where they report feelings of shame, embarrassment and humiliation as a direct result of their mental health condition:

...I'm often so ashamed of my depression, most people usually have an opinion on what it is and how should deal with it without even knowing anything about it. That stigma that's attached to mental health sometimes makes me so embarrassed to let anyone know that I suffer from it out of fear of what they'll think.

(Cara)

...Even though I know my anxiety is a mental condition, and out of my control, I still often feel embarrassed about it. People don't understand why I can't always come to a party or be around a large group of people and I'm often left feeling so ashamed that I make up some shit excuse rather than tell them it's because of my anxiety

(Amy)

Research suggests that anonymity can be strategically used by individuals who blog in order to moderate the relationship between embarrassment and self-disclosure relating to mental health (Rains, 2013). For the participants within this study, feelings of embarrassment that was reported, was directly linked to their mental health condition. This fear of embarrassment or stigmatization has been found to govern many aspects of human behaviour, where often individuals may hide behaviours, opinions or actions consequent of this fear. With this in mind, this may be the reason as to why bloggers share personal experiences online, a sense of invisibility that is available to bloggers, allows them to share their feelings of embarrassment whilst also appearing anonymous. Which research has suggested leads bloggers to often divulge information that is more revealing than they would usually share (Guadagno *et al*, 2008).

Theme 4: Loneliness

Throughout analysis it was apparent that Loneliness was a core theme for all of the participants. Although there are positive aspects to blogging regarding mental health, at some point in their blogging lives every participant felt a sense of loneliness. Research suggests that the majority of individuals who blog do so in order to achieve satisfying online social relationships and want to fit into contemporary society. Thus, those who are marginalized through their blogs,

and have an absence of social connectedness (for example, no-one commenting on their blog posts), begin to feel lonely, and in turn this can have a profound impact on their psychological wellbeing (Johansson and Andreasson, 2017). The following quotes demonstrate this concept of loneliness being a regular experience for bloggers:

...Sometimes the online world can feel quite lonely which is weird considering how many people there are on it. It would just be nice now and again for people reading this to comment on it so I know someone out there appreciates what I'm writing about my mental health because it's not easy to be so honest about it.
(Daniel)

...Blogging for me is a way of letting people in, something which I stay away from doing offline as my anxiety makes social situations difficult for me. I thought it would really help me to be so honest about my experiences throughout my blogs, however sometimes I can't help feeling really alone.
(Ellie)

...It's weird that something as huge as the internet can make us humans feel so lonely. I thought that posting blogs about my mental health would help, and don't get me wrong it's helped me loads with my anxiety, but sometimes I realise that I can be chatting shit to you all and feel like the loneliest person in the world.
(Cara)

There is a growing concern that internet use is undermining human relations, and although blogs are seen as social tools for communicating, they are all too often providing a false sense of social connectedness (D'Amico *et al*, 2017). From the above quotes, a recurring notion of loneliness is apparent when there is no social interaction on one's blog. Extensive use of blogs has been linked to an increase in feeling of loneliness (Kraut *et al*, 1998), and these feelings are strongly linked to a decrease in psychological wellbeing (Burke, Marlow and Lento, 2010).

However, for some of the participants the feelings of loneliness were a result of their mental health illness, as opposed to blogging. This notion of loneliness is exhibited in the following posts:

...I feel so lonely and isolated in my struggles with my mental health. I really struggle with feelings of loneliness and even though it's not always physically obvious, it's still there.

(Beth)

...My anxiety often makes me feel so alone. It's strange the amount of emotional pain that feeling lonely can create, it sometimes makes my anxiety so much harder to deal with....

(Amy)

These quotes are linked directly to feeling of loneliness as a result of one's mental health condition. Although one participant then went on to discuss the ways in which blogging can help this feeling of loneliness that is apparent as a result of their mental health condition:

... but posting about these feelings on my blog make me feel so much better and I know that I'm not on my own.

(Amy)

From the above quotes, it is clear that loneliness is a feeling that is evident for all of the participants within this study. However, this sense of loneliness is, for some created as a result of their mental health condition rather than the act of blogging. Rosendale (2007), reports that loneliness is not a static emotion, but is rather a situational experience that can occur in relation to the absence of social connectedness. Thus, for the bloggers within this study the reasons as to why feelings of loneliness are apparent may alternate dependent on their social relationships at the time, either on or offline (Coyle and Dugan, 2012).

Conclusion

The themes identified within this study have demonstrated both positive and negative aspects associated with blogging for those experiencing mental health

conditions. It is clear that these aspects of blogging have an impact on ones' psychological wellbeing and although they can be a positive platform in which one is able to openly discuss their mental health, it can also be detrimental for ones' psychological wellbeing and cause further complications regarding ones' mental health. From analysis of the blog posts key themes that the researcher set out to explore have clearly been illustrated coinciding with previous research that has found blogging to be both positive and potentially negative for an individual, dependent on the way in which they use their blogs and the social support they receive on them. Surprisingly, all the themes identified were associated with the social interaction that takes place on an individuals' blog.

Limitations of study and future research

In regards to the current study, a limitation was that of the five participants, only one was male, thus results cannot be generalised to those that blog regarding their mental health that are male. Furthermore, only a small number of participants were used within the study, and although within qualitative data the sample size is to be determined by the richness of that data, rather than a large number of participants (Hammersley, 2015). This could be a limitation as results may not necessarily be a general consensus for all those who blog regarding their mental health.

Future studies could look at recruiting larger number of participants spanning over a range of ages and gender in order to gain results that are reflective of a larger, diverse number of bloggers. Furthermore, future research could aim to look into further detail at the consequences blogging has on ones' psychological wellbeing and whether overall this can affect ones' life.

Reflexive Analysis

The researcher was a young female who has experience of living with a mental health condition and reading others personal blogs, therefore had some understanding of the participant's experiences of mental health prior to the study. Furthermore, this allowed the researcher to be empathetic towards the participants, although, this could have been a limitation if empathy prevented the

researcher from staying objective throughout the study. The main focus of the researcher was to understand in more depth the role that blogging plays within the life of an individual living with a mental health condition. And to find out whether this can be used as a positive platform, or can lead to negative consequences for ones' overall psychological wellbeing.

However, as blogs were only downloaded and utilised as the source of data, and participants did not directly give their accounts via an interview, this made it more difficult for the researcher to analyse the posts in an objective way, whilst also ensuring that no preexisting analytical assumptions distorted the analysis. Despite this, the themes that were found upon analysis of the data allowed the researcher to better understand how blogging can play a role in supporting an individual living with mental health.

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